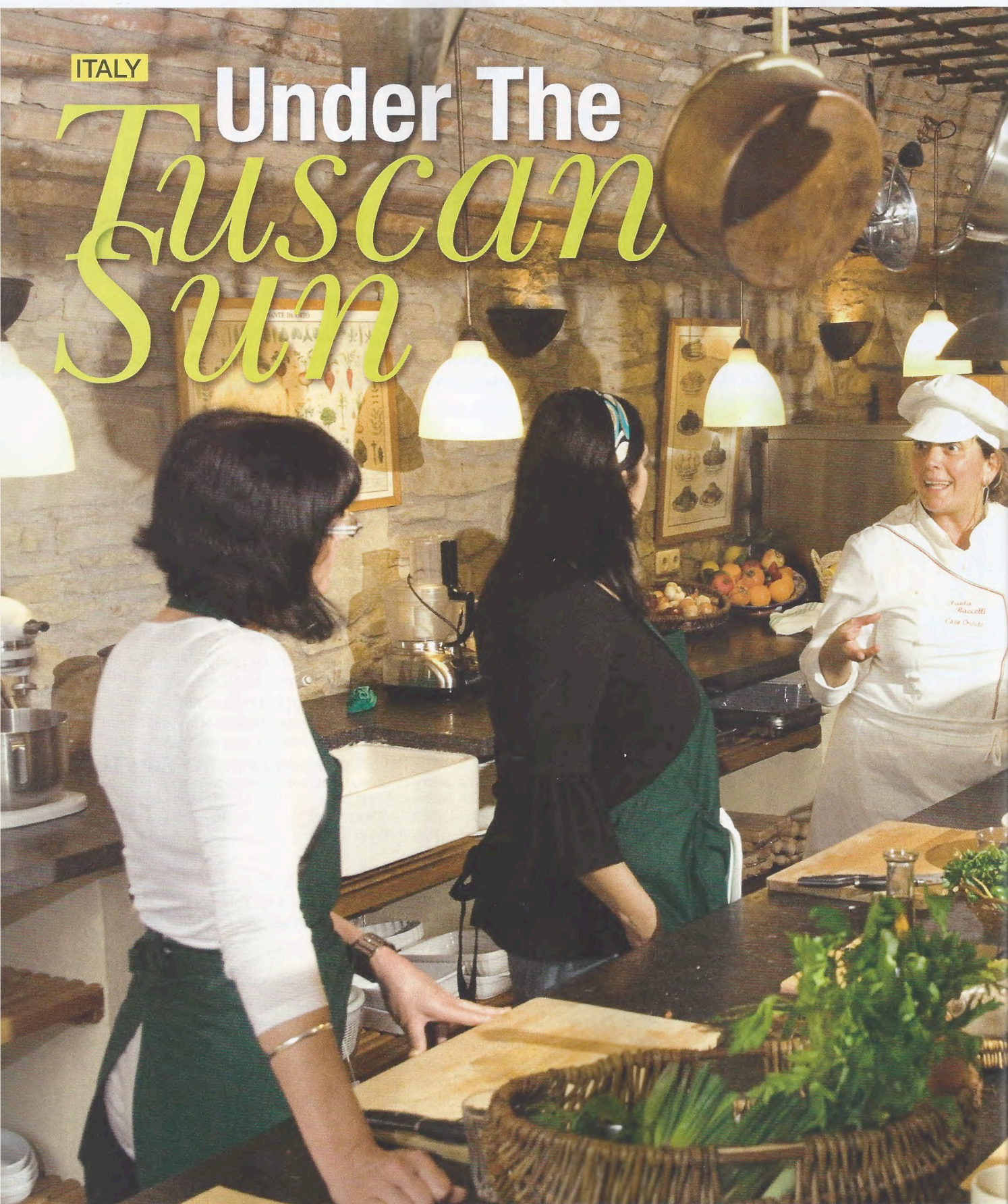


ITALY

Under The *Tuscan* Sun





At the Tuscookany Cooking School, where the kitchen is huge and a jaw-dropping haven of every gadget you might ever need

Big burly Italian chefs, bonding with a group of strangers over some great food, and taking part in a wine harvest—Tuscan cooking vacations combine spectacular location with lots of fun.

BY RESHMA KRISHNAN

AN OCHRE STONE village crowning a hill, bathed in the golden glow of a setting sun *should* have been my first glimpse of Montalcino. Instead I entered this medieval town with my hand gripping the steering wheel and a prayer on my lips. Fairytale landscapes be damned, all I cared about was not accidentally backing into another car mid gear change as I drove up 90-degree incline roads just a little wider than my Citroën. When the GPS finally announced—“You have reached your destination”, I lumbered out of the car, made a beeline for the reception and broke down. My landlady at the *Il Giglio*, handed me a glass of wine *Rosso di Montalcino* and said, “Avventura!” I smiled supposing, what is travel without adventure?

Or for that matter, bad planning. My *raison d'être* for this Tuscan vacation was to take part in a wine harvest. So I chose Montalcino-home to the *Brunello di Montalcino*, the most revered of all Tuscan wines. The only hitch was I was yet to find a vineyard that would let me participate. Unlike those pictures you see of happy Americans in shorts crushing grapes, tourists aren't permitted to be part of the harvest process. Tightening immigration laws meant that my every request had been turned down months beforehand. Being the eternal optimist I still came hoping that some

charitable signor would take pity on a budding novelist. I was wrong.

Phone calls to vineyards became an exercise in futility. My landlady, at the sight of my crestfallen face, said, "La Forza del destino." Everything is fated. So I spent my days taking lunches in *Caffè Fiaschetteria Italiana* (a tourist trap you can avoid) and *Café La Fortezza*, visiting vineyards, *Ciacchi Piccolomini d' Aragona* and tasting rare vintages at the *Enoteca di Piazza*, an excellent cellar where you could taste *Casanova Di Neri* 1999, for a mere four euro. By the third day I had made friends with a gregarious Australian couple who could drink me under the table, my reticent landlady and Luciano, the owner of the local *Taverna Grapollo Blu*. As I dived into his divine *Pinci with Ragu*, he said with an air of nonchalance, "Ciao! We have found you a vineyard."

The next day I was picked up by his daughter, Anna Vittoria, as she did her school run. Lithe, blond and camera ready for *Vogue*, Anna drove me to her family's vineyard, *Villa le*

Prata. There, at the end of a quarter mile driveway flanked by cypress trees lay the villa. Originally a hunting lodge the Count De' Vecchi in 1860, it later became the country residence of the Bishop of Montalcino. Today, Benedetta runs it along with help from family, like Anna.

After a cup of espresso, I was given a pair of gloves and shears to help me harvest one hectare of luscious purple Sangiovese grapes. After three hours and much gossip, I accompanied half a dozen other pickers to a spread of *Chicken Cacciatore* with rosemary potatoes, all served with the house Rosso. I was paid in the form of two bottles of *Brunello*, a most rewarding bonus as I headed back home.

The next day I took off for Poppi, a four-hour drive that would take me through the floodplains of the Arezzo Valley and the Chianti region of Ruffina. I do believe there is a secret theory in Tuscany that the beauty of a Villa is directly proportional to its remoteness. After some of the trickiest hairpin bends I have ever negotiated, I finally arrived at the wrought iron gates of *Casa Ombuto* and a lovely driveway strewn with copper leaves of autumn.

The *Tuscookany* cooking school was started by Pippa Ward Smith and her Partner Lars about 15 years ago. Their mission was to create a vacation that would involve meeting new people, relaxing and discovering Tuscany through its food—The unsalted bread that begs to be drenched in their aggressively flavourful olive oil and the simple way to bake fish in a wrap of sea salt that will make you rue they day they ever thought up fish curry.

But the reason this vacation has been voted a Top 10 cooking vacation by the observer was Paola—Our big haired, feisty, bikerchic, one hundred percent Italian chef. Our days began with a leisurely breakfast and a morning stroll in the woodlands nearby. Chianti was available on tap and we drank it like water. After a quick lunch our group would be seated at a long table and an introduction made of what we were going to make that day. On our first

day Paola zoomed in and scared the living daylights out of our more conservative guests by likening the pleasure of licking Zamboni cream off your fingers to well, other pleasures. Day one had us chopping, cleaning, gutting and basically wrestling with our knives. Our kitchen was filled with the hisses, clangs of falling pots and orders—"More Salt!" "More olive oil!" "Cut that finer!"

Each lesson would begin with a basic skills lesson like chopping after which we would each be given a dish to prepare either in groups or single handedly. Our group was made up of Americans—a mother-daughter couple discovering Italy together, honeymooners that had just returned from Iraq, four Canadian friends and two fantastic cooks from Ireland—the super couple. That evening, Paola would magically dress up our dishes and a glorious table would be set against a roaring fire. She would explain each course, pick a wine to go with it and our three-hour dinner would begin.

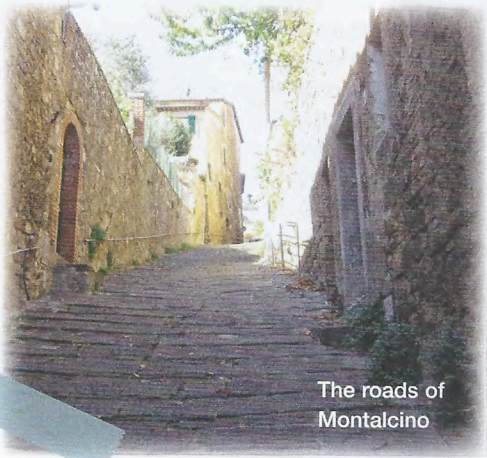
Often guests would retire to the large common rooms with oversized fireplaces—important as even summers here have cold nights. Accommodations are simple and you soon realize that it's in the kitchen where they pull out all the stops—Beef tongue, guinea fowl, pork wrapped in pistachios and as much *Marsella* as you'd like to pour.

The kitchen itself is large and a jaw-dropping haven of every gadget you might ever need; I had never used a digital weighing scale or a food mill before. One of the two fridges stocked water, wine and snacks—think prosciutto and pecorino, to snack on all day. One day in the week you are given a day off where guests discover the village of Poppi or even head to Sienna, two hours away. On another morning, you learn how to make olive oil and goat's cheese at a local farm.

Even today when I look back on that week, I can hear her exclaiming, "Alora! Open your fantasy!" as she dangles a bloody guinea fowl in our faces while I cry over 2 kilos of finely sliced onion for my onion soup and a group of strangers bond over the essence of Tuscany—great food.



Grapollo Blu Cellar



The roads of Montalcino

PHOTOGRAPHS BY RESHMA KRISHNAN

Which cooking vacation is for you?

Something for everyone!

● **The Culinary adventurer:** This format usually involves staying in a stunning villa where you cook 4-5 hours daily, meet fellow travelers and spend a couple of hours a day exploring the surrounding area. Examples are Giuliano Hazan School in Verona (www.giulianohazan.com) or Sazón Cooking School in San Miguel (www.sazon.com). It's perfect for solitary travelers, cooking enthusiasts, and those willing to share holiday time with other cooks and welcome a complete immersion into a region's culture through its food through day trips. So it makes sense to go to a place you have visited before and one whose cuisine you are passionate about.

● **The Wanderer:** These usually take place within city/village limits and cater to those who prefer to choose their own accommodation and like the flexibility of choosing the number of classes.

➤ At Leith's in London, you can attend a one- to 3 day workshop, learn how to make Choux Pastry and take it back to your hotel room. www.leiths.com

➤ Languedoc-Roussillon in Montpellier in France will have you making simplified versions of Michelin star food in one class or five. jardin-des-sens.com.

➤ Otherwise you can just attend a quick cooking class at the Silom Thai Cooking School in Bangkok (www.bangkokthaicooking.com) and get a few pointers on making red curry and still spend most of your time shopping.

● **The Specialist:** Are you wondering why you need to learn how to chop onions when all you want to do is make chocolate? Then perhaps a specialty course at the L'Ecole du Grand Chocolat (valrhona.com) is for you. Perhaps you fancy yourself running a restaurant soon. Then try L'École des Chefs (relaischateaux.com), a boot camp for chefs. Amateurs should not apply.

● **The Sous-chef:** Are you sous chef rather than iron chef? Do you prefer sipping a glass of wine and perhaps stuffing a few ravioli while your dinner is being made for you. Hotels and Villas like Villa Bordini in Greve in Chianti (www.villabordini.com/) or the Four Seasons in Boston (press.fourseasons.com/boston/hotel-news/2012-cooking-class-schedule-at-four-seasons-hotel-boston/) will offer you a couple of hours with their chef while you help him make your delicious dinner. You often leave with a recipe booklet and, yes, lots of wine.

